And now, some selections from the files of Mark Watney (by Andy Weir).

Diary of an AssCan

November 13th.

Holy crap.

I mean seriously, holy crap.

Holy crap!

I can't. I can't believe it.

There it was, my name on the board! They picked me over thousands of other astronaut candidates! After countless hours of physical and mental testing, 10 bajillion psych evaluations, and endless pre-training courses, they picked me.

It's locked in. It's a done deal. I'm on the Ares III primary crew.

I'm going to Mars! Holy crap, I'm going to Mars! I don't recognize the other names on the list, even though I know a lot of other AssCans.

We hang out and commiserate about the selection process, but there were only six people chosen out of thousands! I just never met any of these others. According to the list, their names are Lewis, Martinez, Johansson, Vogel, and Beck. And naturally, there's one more name on that list, Watney. My name's on the list, I'm going to Mars!

My mission role is mechanical engineer, which means I'll fix stuff that breaks during the trip, and my science role is botanist. I'll be doing plant experiments on the surface. Mars is going to get botanied like never before, and I mean that literally. It's like 4.5 billion years old, and so far as we know, nothing's ever grown on it. Ares I and II didn't have any plant related experiments. Hopefully, I'll be able to really learn how plant growth works on the red planet.

They haven't posted the egress order yet, but if they follow their usual pattern, the mechanical engineer leaves the lander fifth. So overall, that'll make me the 17th human to set foot on Mars. It'll take months to get there, and we'll only be spending 31 sols (Martian days) on the surface.

Then it's several months to get back home. It'll be a schedule of experiments and EVAs while we're there. I wish there were a way to spend more time on the surface, but oh well, 31 sols will have to do.

I'm going to Mars!

June 8th

Missed Orbit Scenario. I will never, in my life, hate anything more than I hate missed orbit scenario. My crewmates and I were chosen partially because the psych team figured we'd work well together, and they were right. We've been through rigorous training, travel, sleep deprivation, and constant fatigue together. It's made us stronger and brought us closer together. We're like war buddies. We would literally die for each other.

But I swear to God, if I see any of them in the next few days, I'll strangle them. Missed Orbit Scenario is a situation that could come up when we return to Hermes, our main ship in orbit from the surface of Mars. We'll get to orbit in the Mars Ascent Vehicle (MAV). There's all sorts of stuff that can go wrong with an MAV launch, and one of them is that it could end up in a much lower orbit than intended. If that happens, we'll have to sit tight in the MAV and wait for NASA to remotely control Hermes to come to us.

Problem is, Hermes is powered by ion engines. They give a slow, constant acceleration rather than a powerful point thrust like chemical rockets, so that means it'll take a long time to get it to us. To prepare for this possibility, we have to practice what we do in the MAV during the three freaking days it would take to get Hermes to us! Doesn't seem like much, does it, three days in a ship? Hell, we're going to be in various spaceships and tiny accommodations for over a year during this mission. What's the problem with three days?

Well, I'll tell you. The MAV is designed to get us from Mars's surface to Mars orbit, a trip that takes 23 minutes, so the crew compartment is small. It's basically like being in a minivan, just six seats and some control panels. Pick your five favorite people and then sit in a van with them for three days, and not like a road trip either. For this trip, you don't get to leave the van. Need to go to the bathroom? Get a bag and ask people to look away. Need to sleep? Better hope there isn't a big German guy snoring next to you. Want to make light conversation? No, you don't. I can't explain why, but you don't.

Pretty soon, things get on your nerves. Everything someone says or does pisses you off. We kept things professional, but we were all seething by the time it ended. Frankly, I'm surprised we didn't get into fistfights, but we kept it together. We're all separated now, each of us enjoying some solitude, and they gave us the weekend off. I called Karen Rhodes, mechanical engineer for Ares I, and asked how she handled missed orbit scenario testing. She groaned and told me it was just as bad as I'd had it, so I feel better about that. However, one good thing came out of it. I have even more respect for Lewis than I did before.

As commander, Lewis has a lot of responsibilities. Arguably, the most important is making sure the crew get along. And she didn't try a camp counselor approach by being artificially cheerful or positive. She showed her annoyance as much as the rest of us, but kept professional and level-headed the whole time. Plus, she didn't take sides when the crew started to bicker. Instead, she admonished us all and subtly made herself a more imposing problem than our

petty squabbles with each other. And it worked. I guess it's to be expected. She's an officer in the U.S. Navy. She knows how to make people get along in small spaces. I think we're stronger now than we were before. We've seen each other at our worst and been at each other's throats, and we pulled through.

Overall, Missed Orbit Scenario was a worthy cause. Just the same, I'm steering clear of news websites for the weekend. We're in the news a lot as the launch date approaches. And if I were to see any of my crewmates in a picture or video, I'd probably put my fist through the monitor.

July 6th

This could be my last night on earth. It'll certainly be my last night on earth for a long time. We launch tomorrow. They told me to get a good night's sleep. Yeah, right. I can't take a sleeping pill. They don't want any of us to have residual drugs in our system when we launch, especially things that deliberately induce drowsiness. Makes sense, really. I tried to take my mind off of things with some internet surfing. But you know what? Tomorrow's launch is pretty much the only thing people are talking about right now. So no help there.

I'm in an isolation bunk room at the launch pad. NASA doesn't like surprises. They don't want us getting drunk or injured or mobbed by the press at the last minute. So we've been here for the past three days doing final mission prep.

I'm single, so I guess it's not as rough for me. I feel bad for Lewis and Vogel, who both had to say goodbye to their spouses a week ago. And I especially feel bad for Martinez, who has a wife and a one-year-old baby.

It's going to be a long mission. 124 days to get to Mars, a little over 31 days on the surface, and then 241 days to get back home. 396 days total. Over a year.

I'm going to miss every holiday at least once. In fact, we'll be on the surface for Thanksgiving. NASA even gave us some special rations for it, and we'll have three hours off from our rigorous science schedules to celebrate. Presuming we're alive, that is.

I thought I'd be scared at this point. But I'm past terror and into that weird valley beyond it. I'm pretty anxious, but mostly I'm just impatient.

I don't know if the mission will be successful or not. And I don't even know if I'll get back alive. But one thing's for sure. This, is happening. It's not theoretical anymore.

The booster is fueled. Hermes is fueled and waiting for us in orbit. The mission equipment and supplies are already on Mars, ready for use.

Everything is ready. So I better be ready too.

I Made It

Dear Mom

I just got the news from NASA. They're putting me on the crew of Ares 3. I'm going to Mars!

Dad, I assume you're reading now. Mom probably wadded up the letter and threw it across the room. So, hey, Dad, I'm going to Mars. How awesome is that? Anyway, please tell Mom to continue reading.

Mom, I'll be fine. NASA has warehouses full of nerds who spend all day figuring out how to make me not die. And it's not like this is the first Mars mission or anything. It's the third. I know you're worried there'll be another near disaster like Ares 2, but that decompression was a fluke and everyone survived anyway. They didn't even have to abort the mission. You'll feel better when you meet Commander Lewis. She'll be in charge. She's a veteran of six missions, two of them long-term stays on the space station. She's far and away the most capable and reliable person I've ever known. She knows what she's doing, and she'll make sure we get back all right.

Oh, one minor side note. I'll actually be on Mars for Thanksgiving, so I'm going to miss the usual family gathering in Chicago. Maybe it's for the best. I always end up sleeping on the couch when the family's all there. You know what that means? It means I go to sleep last and wake up second.
They haven't picked a landing site yet, but they're thinking Acidalia Planitia. There used to be a river outflow there, so it should have a good cross-section of geology. I'll be able to do botany experiments on lots of different kinds of soil, and oh my god, it's starting to dawn on me that they're actually going to send me to another planet!

Head between my knees, deep breaths.

Okay, I'm feeling better now. Anyway, Mom, nothing to worry about! We have two weeks off before they start hammering us with training, so I figured I'd come out and visit. Then you can tell me how much you hate the idea of your baby boy riding a giant bomb to a planet that makes the Sahara Desert look like a tropical paradise. I'll be seeing both of you soon,

Mark

P.S. I'd appreciate it if you could show this letter to my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. McGreevy. I think she still teaches at Jackson Elementary. She once told me I'd never amount to anything. Tell her I'm an astronaut now and that I'm going to Mars. Then say, and try to make it really snide. Thanks!

Car Trouble

Dear Mom

Sorry it took me so long to write. Training has been kicking my ass. It's pretty much non-stop, especially now that we're three months from launch, and I'm almost a full day behind because my car is a piece of crap.

I was driving from Site 14 back to Johnson Space Center, which is a four-hour drive through Texas wasteland, when the car just died. No overheating, no warning, nothing. It just stopped working and I coasted to the side of the road. I checked out the engine and there wasn't anything obviously wrong. I later learned it was a critical fault in the computer. The damn thing just died. I hate computers.

I know what you're thinking. No problem. Just call NASA. They'll send a helicopter or something because you're a big important astronaut. Problem is I was stupid when I packed for the trip, so I had the phone's data cable instead of the charger. I had been at Site 14 doing EVA drills for the last four days and in that time the phone had run out of juice. The road was dead. No cars anywhere. And it was 20 miles to the nearest gas station.

But fear not. Your boy is a clever one. I used my pocket knife to cut open the data cable's USB connector. The pins on the far left and right are the ones that carry power. The wires that led to them were red and black, so I assumed red was positive. That was a risky assumption, but I had at least a 50% chance of being right, and the phone probably had a diode to prevent power going the wrong way.

Anyway, the phone wants 5 volts of power, so if I attached it to the car's 12-volt system, it would fry. Lucky for me, most cars have some stock electronic parts that require 5 volts. One such system is the throttle position sensor, or TPS as car geeks call it. That's how the computer knows the current throttle setting. The TPS is in the engine bay, so I had to do everything while hunched over a still-hot engine block. But, I managed to cut the TPS's power lines and twist them together with the data cable's power leads. Then I plugged my new makeshift charger into the phone and prayed I got the polarity right.

Turns out I did. After a few minutes of charging, I was able to boot up and call for a tow. Dealing with the towing and mechanic cost me hours of time I didn't really have, and the mechanic seemed pretty mad about the hatchet job I'd done to the TPS.

But it was worth it to save myself an all-day hike through the Texas sun. Things will be a lot simpler for me once the mission starts. I'll have top-quality equipment everywhere. I won't have to deal with problems like this.

Love, Mark

The Earthling

Friday, April 9th, 2038

So my psychiatrist says I should keep a journal. She says I used journaling as a coping mechanism when I was stuck on Mars, and I should keep doing it because it's a healthy outlet for emotional shit.

Is she right? Hell if I know. But she's pretty good at her job. It's been a week since I woke up screaming in the middle of the night. I assume she'll be right about the journal too. So I bought a journal. Yay me.

It's weird though. Back when I was on Mars, I didn't think anyone would read my log entries. But this journal? You bet your ass they'll read it.

And when I say they, I really mean you. Yeah, you, the person reading this, whoever you are. You're probably a historian cataloging shit people found in my attic after I died. And you're probably mad I didn't say whomever up there. Fucking nerd. Enjoy the journal.

Anyway, you fucking nerd, today was an interesting day. Interesting enough that it'll be my first entry in this shiny new Earth journal.

After we landed, I got probed by so many doctors, I don't even consider my orifices my own anymore.

Then I had to stay in the hospital for two weeks because they really wanted to check me for cancer. By all rights, I should have tumors all over the place.

The Hab was designed to house people for 31 sols, not 560. My radiation dose was somewhere between a hundred dental x-rays and Chernobyl. They don't know it more accurately than that. They say I'll need extremely invasive exams every month for the foreseeable forever, because a lot of my DNA is probably Swiss cheese.

Our conversation went something like this:

Doctor: We need to aggressively monitor you so we'll know if you get cancer.

Me: Does there have to be so much butt stuff?

Doctor: Sir, we specialize in butt stuff. Just consider yourself lucky you don't already have cancer.

Lucky, right. A lucky guy wouldn't get stranded on another goddamn planet in the first place. I spent the next couple of months hiding at my house. Every news outlet, website, and talk show wanted a piece of me. I said no to all of them. I'm not a fame guy. I just wanted peace and pizza. I got both by staying at home.

I had a couple weeks of my parents doting on me. That was nice. But then normalcy set in, and thank God it did. When I say I stayed at home, I mean I stayed at home, like I had groceries delivered and cleaning people come take the trash away. The therapist says that's not okay, but it's understandable. I kind of learned to fear the outdoors. I don't have to worry my condo will suddenly decompress or that the pantry will slowly dwindle until I starve, but I do have to accept that Houston isn't instantly deadly if I step outside without a spacesuit. Well, sometimes it's hot and humid and you kind of want to die, but you don't actually die.

Anyway, I made a rare foray outside today because I got an invitation I couldn't refuse. The Launchpad is my favorite bar and grill. Sure, it has a silly NASA theme to it, kitschy Saturn V models, rocket-shaped menus, shit like that, but who cares? They make good burgers.

I sat at a table in the corner and hoped not to be spotted. My face was plastered all over the world for three years, kind of hard to keep a low profile after that. She showed up with beers in hand. She sat across from me and handed one over.

“Hefeweizen, right?” Always, I took the beer from her. “Good to see you again, Commander.”

Lewis sipped her beer. “I'm not your commander anymore, Mark. You can call me Melissa.”

“Sure thing, Commander." I raised my hand to get the waiter's attention. The waiter came over and pulled out his pad.

“What can I get for you folks?”

“I'm fine with just the beer,” Lewis said.

“Cheeseburger medium,” I said. “Every conceivable vegetable on it.”

“Extra cheese, too. And bacon. Gotcha,” said the waiter.

“And would you like steak fries or curly fries with that?” “No fries, thanks.” “They come with the burger, you just pick which kind.” “Hold the fries.”

“But they're free.” “No fucking fries!” The waiter scurried off. Lewis snickered.

“Still relearning those people skills?” I shrugged. “Guess so. How's the rest of the gang these days?”

“Well, let's see,” she said.

“Vogel retired from ESA. I guess three years in space was enough for him. He's a chemistry professor at the University of Bremen now. He seems happy.”

I took a swig of my beer. “How about Beck and Johansson? They still doing the couple thing?”

“Oh, sure,” she said. “They live together now. Nice little house, just outside Houston. Have you been in touch with Martinez?” “Yeah, we play online games twice a week.”

Lewis laughed. “Seriously?” I had to chuckle too. “I don't like leaving the house and his wife is pregnant, so we're both kind of shut-ins.”

“They're having another kid?” Lewis shook her head. “Amazing.”

“Yeah, I know, right? It's like they have a kid every nine months and twenty minutes. But hey, that's what they want. And how about you, Commander? Still rocking that disco music?”

“You know it! She raised her glass. I listened to Boney M. on the way over here, in fact.”

“I don't even know what that is.” “That's okay. You can be an uncultured swine.”

The waiter showed up with my basket. “Cheeseburger. No fries.”

He dropped it in front of me and walked onward. “Making friends,” Lewis said. I grabbed the burger with both hands and took a bite. I'd probably gained ten kilos since getting back to Earth, but I just couldn't get enough of that glorious, glorious grease.

“So,” I said with food still in my mouth, “I hear you left NASA.”

She leaned back in her chair. “Yeah, they'd assigned me to a conceptual missions group.”

I winced. “Put out to pasture, eh? Still mad about the whole mutiny thing?”

“Barratry,” she said, “but yeah.”

“What the hell is barratry?”

“It's when a captain of a ship disobeys orders from her superiors,” she said. “Mutiny is when a crew disobeys their captain. The whole Rich Purnell thing was barratry because I ordered it.”

“What is it with you Navy people and weird, outdated terms?”

“They're not outdated.”

“Right. Hey, can you pass the salt that's on your starboard side?” She smirked and handed over the salt.

“So what's your plan, Mark? Stay in your condo forever?” I swallowed the chunk of burger and took another bite. “Forever? I mean, not forever. I'll die of old age eventually. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I'm working for a new company now. They're recruiting.” I dropped the burger. “Is this a multi-level marketing thing?”

“Oh, for Christ's sake, Mark, give me some credit.” The commander pulled out a business card. “I'm working for Global Escape.”

I looked at the card. Glossy, nice logo. There was a little rocket on it and everything. And it said: Captain Melissa Lewis, USN, retired, astronaut.

“Global Escape,” I said. “I haven't heard of them.”

“They're new. They're going to build a space hotel in low earth orbit called Gagarin. It'll hold up to 60 guests and staff. They think they can get the cost for a one-week stay down to $200,000. That includes launch and landing.”

“You're working for Russians now?”

“Africans, actually. Global Escape is just one small part of a big international conglomerate coming together. They're going all in to be commercial space leaders. Corporations from all over the world are investing in it.”

I waved her off. “Sounds like any other space tourism company. They're all the same, a bunch of jerking off with CGI models followed by no progress.”

“This one's different,” she said. “This one is absurdly well-funded. They have billions to play with, not in promises or vague partnership deals. They have billions in the bank right now and they're using it.”

“Let me guess, they need astronauts?”

“They need astronauts,” she confirmed. “Do you know how much it costs to train someone to our level? Between $40 and $50 million. By already being trained, we save them a lot of money and they pay very well.”

I put my hands up. “Hold up, Commander. I want you to listen really close here. I'm never leaving Earth again. Ever. Under any circumstances. I want to die here. I mean, a long time from now, but you know what I mean.”

She crossed her arms. “You have to leave your house eventually, Mark.”

“By leaving the planet?” I said. “Nuh-uh. Commander, you of all people should know how deeply and passionately I care about exploring the cosmos.”

“My salary is $5 million a year. Yours would be the same.”

I put my burger down. “Is that supposed to be an argument? Do you know how stupidly famous I am? I can make as much money as I want by doing endorsement deals.”

I struck a formal, rigid pose. “Hi, I'm Mark Watney. Being stuck on Mars was a pain in the ass. But if you have a pain in the ass, take Preparation H!”

She took a good-sized swig of beer. “You go out to your backyard at night and look up at the stars, right? You find Mars in the sky if it's visible. And you just stare at it. You do this every night.”

I blinked a couple of times. “Are you, like, having me watched or something?”

“No, Mark. I know you do it because I do it. And I guarantee you Vogel, Martinez, Beck, and Johansson do as well.”

“You going after them too?” “Maybe.”

She tapped her card a couple of times. “My number's on there. And you have my personal cell, of course.”

She polished off her beer, stood, and grabbed her purse. “Once you go up, you never really come back down. Give me a call when this planet gets too small for you.” She walked off to the exit.

She's fucking crazy. Well, actually, she's the sanest person I've ever known, and I repeatedly trusted her with my life. But this? Nah. I snorted at the card and shook my head. I paid my bill and went home, back to the comfort of my Earth hab.

Somehow I accidentally brought Lewis's card home with me. I don't remember slipping it into my pocket, but you know how it is. Sometimes you get on autopilot when you're leaving a restaurant. You make sure you have your wallet and keys, you grab your sunglasses off the table, and maybe you absentmindedly pick up your former Mars mission commander's business card.

Well, I wouldn't have any need for it. I set it on my desk and made a mental note to throw it away later. Then I went out back, to look at the stars.